eFun 2 (1250 words)

By Brian Clegg

THE UNEXPLAINED
It has taken me a while to come to love the interactive documentary, but two products in this batch of reviews have shown me the error of my ways. Until now, I could get excited about a CD-ROM as a reference work, but didn't want to sit in front of one and be talked at. At last, though, there are titles like the Unexplained which are good enough to deserve such concentrated attention.
I have to confess to being a sucker for the mysterious, from ley lines to UFOs. The Unexplained provides a wide ranging commentary on anything that might grab the attention of an X-Files wannabe. The look and feel is good, and suitably mysterious, with each of six major topics divided into subchapters of sound, image and occasional video. Like a good book, The Unexplained left me wanting to turn to the next section, rather than put it away. If you're a sceptic, you'll probably find the presentation unbalanced - some highly doubtful flying saucer stories, for instance, get by with hardly a raised eyebrow - on the other hand, one segment of the crop circles piece concentrates entirely on fakers. There's also the excellent bonus of a web document on the CD with online links to relevant sites. The truth might be out there, but until it comes knocking on the door, the Unexplained is as good a view as any.

Overall - A stylish Windows infotainment CD that provides a good tour of the mysterious. Priced around £29.99 in the UK. Produced by FlagTower, web site: http://www.flagtower.com

[Screen shot - UNEXPL.GIF]

INDIANA JONES - DESKTOP ADVENTURES
The trend in games is from big to elephantine, with three or four CD-ROMs and 50 megabytes or more of hard disk requirement no longer unusual. Indiana Jones - Desktop Adventures, which comes on two floppies is, by comparison, a shrimp and hence rather refreshing. This is a Windows implementation of an old fashioned style of adventure where a small figure moves around a playing area using a weapon, pushing boulders and picking up artefacts, the sort of thing we were playing on Amigas and Ataris back in the 80s.
It is, however, somewhat improved by a neat mechanism that produces billions of variants on the plot, some (written) speech interaction between characters and reasonable graphical controls. If you're using the Windows 95 Energy Star feature to set your monitor to standby, you should be aware that on my PC, Indiana caused Windows to crash when the power saving feature cut in.

Overall - a compact graphical game which feels a little old fashioned but is flexible enough to continue being interesting for a while, and is good value for money.
Priced around £9.99 in the UK. Produced by LucasArts, web site:
http://www.lucasarts.com
Distributed by Virgin Interactive Entertainment, web site:
http://www.vie.co.uk/vie/

[Screen shot - INDY.GIF]

CRITICAL MASS
Here's another infotainment CD-ROM that proves that it's possible to produce a multimedia title that's intriguing as well as informative. Critical Mass is centred around the first atomic bomb test at the Trinity site near Los Alamos. Although this is a technical subject, there's a strong focus on people, with biographies of four of the main players, including polymath Richard Feynmann, and more information on others involved. Probably the most exciting part is the exploration of the site itself. From a number of vantage points you can look around through 360 degrees at a (drawn) view of the location. A number of buildings have an information marker - clicking on one of these opens into a short documentary section linked to that particular aspect of the site.
It would have been good if all the named buildings could have at least had a fact sheet when clicked on, but the overall feel, complete with eerie music, is very effective. Supporting these main threads are snippets of information on topics as diverse as popular culture and (now de-)classified letters between significant protagonists. I find it difficult to get excited about war documentaries, but this location and event was so significant in so many fields that it makes for great watching. Attention to detail is good - for example music plays during installation - and though the package recommends 256 colours, I haven't had any trouble running it at a higher setting.

Overall - One of the key developments of the twentieth century chronicled in a fascinating Windows CD-ROM. Priced around £49.95 in the UK. Produced by Corbis, web site:
http://www.corbis.com

[Cover Pic -CRITMASS.GIF]

SPYCRAFT - THE GREAT GAME
Activision seems to be leading the games world when it comes to making use of the graphics that Windows 95 is capable of. Like Zork Nemesis [link to previous review], the 3 Spycraft CD-ROMs include both DOS and Windows 95 versions of the software. But this is a very different type of game. Supposedly based on input from ex CIA and KGB bosses, Spycraft puts you in the position of a newly recruited CIA agent. After a short training session you are put on a critical mission to avoid the destabilisation of détente.
On the whole this works well. To achieve your task you need to use a range of technical tools - for instance cleaning up a spy satellite photograph or setting up a photo-fit picture of a suspect. At the same time you must manage your communications on a web-linked PDA, interview suspects and informants and generally stay alive. This last is supported by the least convincing part of the game, poorly executed shooting gallery segments with little real skill involved. I found that Spycraft did pull me in and make me want more, though I was uncomfortable with the way that the outcome of some of the puzzles was little more than guesswork, realistic though this may be. After a time, too, the tasks became a little tedious - again, perhaps too realistic.
One novel feature is the online option, which downloads extra information for your game PDA and gives you the option of linking through to a special web site (though sadly on your usual browser rather than Spycraft itself). In practice this proved more

of an irritation than a benefit.

Overall - A heavyweight spying simulation for Windows 95 or DOS with plenty of activities and a clever interface, let down by uninspiring shooting sections. Priced around £35 to £40 In the UK. Produced by Activision, web site: http://www.activision.com

[Screenshot - SPY1.GIF]

KICK-OFF 96
It's a game of two halves, Brian - in this case five minutes a side. I have a confession to make - I really don't like football (soccer to those who know no better). I hated playing it at school; I still hate watching it. This might suggest that Kick-Off 96, a soccer simulation, is faced with a badly sloping pitch. Playing the game on a screen is a different matter, though. This is a richly implemented simulation taking up 50Mb of hard disk from the CD-ROM, with a wealth of teams, thousands of players and the ability to create your own dream team. Once into play, the sounds and 3D graphics are good, with beautifully smooth movement. I found it harder to pick up the ball than I expected, even in arcade mode, but the game play seems to work well.
I don't know if it will always be there, but my copy of Kick-Off came bundled with a free playing card version of the game - it didn't do a lot for me, but proved quite acceptable to a ten-year-old.

Overall - A detailed, smooth soccer simulation, if you like that kind of thing. Priced around £34.99 for the PC CD-ROM, £24.99 on floppy. In the UK. Produced by Anco and distributed by Virgin Interactive Entertainment, web site: http://www.vie.co.uk/vie/

[Screen shot - KICKOFF.GIF]

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